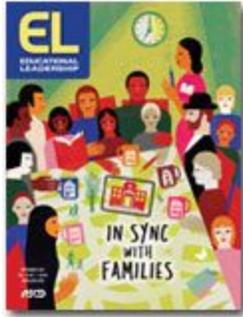




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Beginning Again With Marginalized Parents

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To tap parents' knowledge and support, an alternative high school program created new opportunities for communication.

One great lesson I've learned as a school leader is that a key to sustaining positive learning outcomes is synchronizing your agenda with the needs of students' families. I've found that three things are essential for this to happen: You must become a consummate communicator; you must repurpose the structures of family-engagement initiatives; and you must be honest about the fluid and often inconclusive nature of working with struggling learners.

Nowhere are these elements more important than in working with high school students in alternative-learning settings, as I have done for the past two years. These are the families that often feel the

most marginalized by schools. Their children generally have a history of failure and exclusion from mainstream settings. These students often suffer from psycho-emotional dysregulation and have learning disabilities and behavioral problems. They may come from unstable home lives and be subject to court involvement. It's no wonder that their families often feel insecure or alienated in their relationships with schools.

Ramping Up Communication

In the alternative program I directed at Randolph High School in Massachusetts, the great majority of the students were black or brown and male, with significant behavior challenges and a history of academic struggles. Most of them were on individualized education plans. We also shared the same building with mainstream students, so there was a tendency for alternative students to be ostracized and demeaned. Before I arrived, they were known as "the basement kids" or the "crazy cut-ups" by adults and other students.

This was a public image that I was determined to fight. To do that, I knew we needed to enlist the parents and caregivers who sent us their most prized possessions each day—and who had loved these children long before educational institutions began applying all kinds of unflattering labels to them.

One thing I learned fairly quickly in my position was that nearly every parent or caregiver had important insights on why their child struggled in academic settings. The problem was just that for too long, their perspectives were ignored, or weren't given enough weight to frame the discourse on what was needed to boost progress. They were seldom asked what it would take for David to pass the course or to stop getting suspended. And what did it matter what Savion's grandma thought would get him to do his homework again, or get out of bed and get to school on time?

Often the families of struggling students are implicitly treated as part of the problem. Schools can sometimes presume that they must do what they can for a student *in spite of* parents, who may be seen as not sufficiently vested or not fully appreciating the importance of education. This kind of thinking results in countless interactions where parents come to feel their voice is silenced, muted, or undervalued in the exchange of ideas—thus further alienating them from their child's education.

We were determined to change this dynamic by setting up opportunities to communicate continually and respectfully with parents, an approach that we knew had the potential to increase their sense of connection to the school.¹ For example, we started last school year with a back-to-school barbecue for families. In a low-stakes, convivial setting like a barbecue, you can learn quite a bit about the hopes and dreams of parents as you embark on a year of teaching and learning with their children. For the parents of struggling students, back to school is a time for optimism, peppered with lingering concerns over last year's dashed hopes. Parents' hopes that this year might be different may be accompanied by fears about the reality that

their son or daughter is getting older and closer to the time they'll have to fend for themselves. Will they be ready academically or behaviorally?

This is precisely the time when parents and guardians must hear from school leaders about what will be different, how much you're willing to work with them and not prejudge them, and how much you depend on their support to create the success they envision. It's when you must sell them on the idea of a partnership. At the start of the year, our school counselor and I also held briefings with parents, often by phone, to find out when parents and caregivers were most likely to be available to speak, when they were off from work, and which teachers they were more likely to email or call back. And then we ramped up communication. By the end of the year, parents had come to expect daily texts from us when their student was late or, alternatively, on time for a change; when someone didn't seem themselves today; or when a day that began poorly ended on a high note. Immediate feedback works for adults as well as kids: We found that parents were very responsive to texts with positive or critical information, as if they preferred a succinct synopsis to another "lecture" on their child's problems.

A number of students also received weekly progress reports emailed home every Friday, and caregivers knew their child had been briefed about what was in the report before they got home for that conversation. Teachers were expected to communicate positive feedback to families about every student each month. We also added a nice touch to our Student of the Month announcements: The write-up, certificate, and optional photo-op were all mailed or emailed to families: Even our toughest teens still enjoyed certificates and public recognition.

Repurposing Events

We also found that we had to restructure the forums we had been using for dialogue with parents. The clearest example of the need for a shift was the disciplinary hearings held in consideration of a student suspension. In these hearings, I typically faced an obviously annoyed family member who had his or her arms crossed, ready to spar over whether their child was truly at fault, and demanding to know what would happen to the other students involved. At times, this might quickly give way to an angry lecture about being tired of coming to school for things like this, accompanied by threats to disown the child. These were often loud and expletive-laced meetings. Keep in mind many of these parents had sat in countless suspension and expulsion hearings, mere recipients of legalistic chatter and procedural paperwork detailing the infraction and sentence.

To change the pattern, I decided to let the parents vent their frustrations and then invite them to problem solve with me instead of just outlining the infraction and terms of the suspension. What follows is my part of an interaction I recently had with a disgruntled parent who'd grown tired of the regular reports on her son's misdeeds:

I can tell you are frustrated about having to hear about Donald's inappropriate behavior. We are also struggling with how to best meet his needs when he acts in this way; we need your help and his to try and figure out what is going to work so that he can learn and his teachers can teach. Right now, when Donald [acts this way], it affects him, his peers, and the learning environment. What can we all do differently? What can he do to meet his needs and the teacher's expectations, what can we do the next time he gets frustrated, and what's the best way to communicate his progress to you so that you don't feel overwhelmed? And finally, how can we make things right between him and the offended party?

Speaking to parents this way serves several purposes. First, it communicates your understanding that the occasion for this interaction is humiliating to them, that it makes them feel like a failure because their kid is being singled out for poor behavior. Second, it structures the interaction as a dialogue, an exchange of ideas. It communicates that, even as the voice of the school, I am not judging family caregivers, that I don't presume to have all the answers, and that I need their help in arriving at a course of action. Third, it invites the parent or caregiver's thoughts and considerations to the table as an equal player, as a part of the solution rather than the problem. And fourth, it communicates that the student himself—and his understanding of the problem—is central to making progress.

This same kind of conversation, my colleagues and I found, is necessary in addressing other issues, like truancy or refusing to engage in schoolwork. In all instances, you must leave the meeting with a written plan on how you all agree to proceed. It also helped that we no longer called these meetings disciplinary hearings. Rather, we deliberately referred to them as problem-solving conferences; this broadened the purpose and criteria for the meetings and communicated a positive end goal.

Another forum we repurposed was our parent-teacher conferences. In past years, these were often tense interactions, with parents arriving with the expectation of bad news, frequently with brows furrowed and arms crossed. Then there were the teachers, who were often nervous about how families would react to news about their kid's poor performance, so much so that sugar-coating and avoidance often got in the way of honest conversation.

So we made an effort to take the edge off by launching a family dinner and conversation event in place of parent-teacher conferences. We purchased and cooked dinner items (having taken entrée orders from the students to entice them to attend). We told the students that, in addition to their parents, they could bring a friend or sibling, and promised them community-service hours for attending. We opened the evening by thanking everyone for making the time to come and proclaiming this would not be a typical conference night. The group of us—parents, siblings, students, and teachers—sat around an oversized table in our community space and ate, played music, joked, and conversed. Teachers moved around the room engaging in general conversations about individual students' progress. Parents had opportunities to talk about the challenges of raising and guiding teens. We got to see different sides of those students who were accompanied by older

or younger siblings; the toughened facade often melted away when they were caring for a baby sister or deferring to an older brother.

After about an hour or so, we asked teachers to go to their classrooms to meet individually with families and discuss student progress. It was at that time that the teachers specifically addressed the report card grades and behavior, always with a goal of coming to an agreed-upon plan for moving forward. While this event took a lot of planning and flexibility, it created a cooperative and constructive environment.

As a result, attendance at our parent-teacher conference increased by 300 percent over two years. Last year, both parents or multiple caregivers often showed up.

Keeping It Real: There Are No Easy Answers

One of the most difficult things to accept as adults working with at-risk students is not having the answers. As parents, we lament over why our best efforts don't seem to be turning our child's behavior around. As teachers, we struggle with not being able to make effective progress with a student, academically or otherwise, despite having tried "everything." As Jeffrey Benson put it, "With no reliably predictable timetable for success, these students try our patience, arouse our emotions, and often bruise our professional pride as teachers, problem solvers and caretakers."²

Sometimes this pervasive uncertainty lures us into considering quick fixes like drill-and-kill remediation, punitive discipline, or removal from the classroom. These measures might temporarily resolve an issue and give educators a sense of satisfaction for at least doing something, but the student will return to you, or another teacher, further behind, having learned little about appropriate conflict resolution or better strategies to comprehend and compute.

In working with extremely challenging teenagers and in gaining the trust and support of their parents, we must accept that these kids are—as we are—a work in progress. We will have good days and bad, moments when we (our students and ourselves) shine and make the world proud, and other instances when our best selves are unrecognizable. The work will not always be easy, and progress will not always be quick—but we must press forward, always providing support and compassion. That is an important message that our staff routinely shared with parents and one another.

Our problem-solving conferences with parents, for example, were designed to show that we were always in a cycle of observing and analyzing a problem or challenge, prescribing a strategy or intervention, assessing its impact, and then reworking as needed. And we were always looking to communicate progress, however slight, in our students' social and academic journey. We tried to present the long view, by looking at where the students were when they first entered the program and how far they had come. When we did discuss setbacks, my counselor and I often used examples from our own lives or those of our children, to show that we are all a work in progress.

We also encouraged the adoption of a growth mindset, in which failure and reflection are understood as an integral part of getting better at anything. We used this language in our conference forms, in our conversations with parents and students, and in our recognition of improvement. We had shout-outs at our community meetings every Friday, calling attention to incremental growth in a range of areas, including social interactions, academic stamina, taking ownership for actions, or recentering oneself during an emotional outburst.

Such interactions help synchronize our realities as educators and caregivers who want the best for the children we support. They open a door of humanity for struggling parents to escape judgment and for struggling teachers to accept limitations.

Indeed, the changes we made in communicating with parents had profound effects on their interactions with us and their engagement in their children's development. We had one parent break down in tears in a conference because we were the first program that did not give up on and label her child (who ended up graduating early, incidentally). We had parents apologize for being angry or frustrated in moments of discussion about problematic behaviors. We had parents ask us to advocate for other children of theirs who were in the mainstream high school, based on the outreach we had done in the alternative program. Some parents called or texted the counselor or me on weekends, sharing success and struggles and seeking advice and guidance. Some sought us out to interpret the obscure language in evaluation and testing documents related to special education referrals. They had come to trust us.

The Power of Connection

There is still much work to do to improve the academic progress and life trajectories of the students in the alternative academy connected to Randolph High School. But I am confident that by communicating relentlessly with home, refocusing parent events, and keeping it real, we gave teachers and parents opportunities to do their best work. And with stronger links between home and school, students can produce better and more sustainable results, and look back proudly on the moments when things finally seemed to be working in their favor. That can make all the difference in their sense of self-worth and their future course.

Endnotes

¹ Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: The New Press.

² Benson, J. (2014). *Hangin' in: Strategies for teaching the students who challenge us most* (pp. vii-ix). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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